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ABSTRACT

This case study examines the founding of a high school in a developing rural area in Washington and the school's efforts to serve a changing and diversifying population. Having been expropriated for the war effort in the 1940s, the town of Mattawa (Washington) was rebuilt after the war, but high school students were bused to other school districts until the 1980s. An intensive effort by residents led to the opening of Wahluke High School in 1987. In the 10 years that followed, the development of area orchards and vineyards sparked population growth and the influx of primarily Mexican American farmworkers. The school district's enrollment rose from 374 to 1,287 students in all grades, and the composition of the high school shifted from 67 percent Anglo to 71 percent Hispanic. From its beginning, the high school has been a community school, providing instruction to local residents of all ages, pursuing entrepreneurial strategies in student projects, and using oral history assignments to help students learn about the community. As the Spanish-speaking population has grown, the school has added bilingual education, recognized Hispanic culture in various ways, and worked hard to meet the challenges of keeping farmworkers' and migrant workers' children in school and succeeding. (SV)

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CHAPTER 5

We Built It and They Came: A Case Study of Wahluke High School, Mattawa, Washington

DIANE DOREMAN[1]

In the high desert beyond the Hanford Nuclear Reservation and along the bend of the Columbia River lie the hamlets and farmlands of Wahluke School District, in Grant County, Washington. The landscape is dry; in the November chill it is dusty brown and gray. Stands of bare fruit trees line the roads. Beyond the trees are the battered wooden shacks and trailers of the immigrant farm workers. Strung along the road up the hill to the town of Mattawa[2] are an auto supply store, Anglo and Mexican grocery stores, and a community center. Neat trailer homes, interspersed with peeling, rusty, boarded trailers, line the handful of streets that mark the town off from the desert.

Wahluke School District

At the last intersection, a left turn leads to the brick building housing Wahluke School District's administrative offices. A flag waves in front of the offices, which were built in 1952 by the Public Utilities District (PUD) to house the then newly reopened school. The local school had been closed and all the town residents moved when the federal government took the land and built the nuclear reservation.

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Some land has been returned along with the school, but much of the land surrounding Mattawa is still held by the government.

Beyond the offices, Mattawa Elementary, Saddle Mountain Intermediate, Morris Schott Middle, and Wahluke High School stretch back along the road, which is surrounded by fields. The whole district sits on this single patch of land in Mattawa.

The district has a short but spectacular history. Wahluke High School was founded in the early 1980s. The community struggled with the state to build this school that has since grown and flourished. Having recently acquired 60 acres across the road, the district awaits the start of new construction. Additions have been made to the current high school, and the intermediate school is new, but, with a 244 percent increase in enrollment in the past decade, the district is one of the fastest growing in Washington state. The Wahluke High School principal said the district has seen construction every year he has been there and they are hungrily eyeing those 60 acres across the road.

The founding of the high school is both a cause and an effect of the demographic changes the community has experienced over the past 20 years. Steady changes in population size and ethnicity played an important role in the founding of the school, though residents may not fully acknowledge all the implications of the community's transformation, and first-time visitors would be hard pressed to see them.

Outwardly, the district presents only a few symbols of these transformations. The district offices have been remodeled, and in the bright reception area hang enlarged photographs of the local Wanapum peoples in tribal dress at festivals. Recognizing local Native people is important to the district's sense of identity. The high school symbol is an Indian warrior head; their football team is named the "Warriors." An Indian maiden memorializes Mrs. Schott, a founding member of the community. The Wanapum remain a locally vital presence, but for the district, the Native identity is largely symbolic. Wanapum students comprise a small fraction of school enrollment.

The staff in the district is largely Anglo, but the principals of the intermediate and elementary schools tell us more about a growing proportion of community members. The principals, Luz Juarez-Stump and Delcine Mesa-Johnson, are both the daughters of Hispanic immigrants and they flesh out a picture of the community that begins forming as one drives past the Mexican grocery store in town and past

the fruit trees tended by immigrant farm workers. The schools and the district serve a local population that is more than 70 percent Hispanic. The sons and daughters of the Latinos and Latinas who migrated to northern farms for work have settled among the orchards of Mattawa with their families. These orchards offer year-round employment. Instead of moving with the crops, families are staying on in Mattawa and they are sending their children to school. These laborers and the ethnic difference they represent are as much a part of Mattawa as the farms, streets, and district buildings.

What lies beneath this snapshot of a small, rural district is the story of how Anglo farmers joined together to found a high school to which the children of the farm workers now go. The residents of Mattawa worked to build their community through agricultural development and access to secondary education. Was the school built to educate the children of Hispanic farm workers? Perhaps. But, as we learn the story of the farmers and their school, we find that it is not at all clear.

Founding a School

After the federal government expropriated the land that included Mattawa in the 1940s, it moved residents away and closed the local school. Following the war, some land was returned, homes reclaimed, and limited farm production resumed. Row crops predominated on the dry land. In 1952, the PUD was building the Wanapum and Priest Rapids dams and wanted an educated labor force. They built what is now the administration building to house the reopened elementary and middle schools. Around this time, Morris Schott and his wife began to buy up large tracts of land and rebuild a town devastated by the wartime relocation. This rebuilding process coincided with the Grant County Improvement Project, which brought irrigation (from the dams) to the area. Irrigation increased row cropping and led subsequently to orchard production. The combination of climate, irrigation, and hard work have made the orchards a huge success. Mattawa sits in a region that enjoys a great number (260) of sunny and frost-free days each year, and the town produces the state's earliest apples and cherries. Thirty-eight thousand acres[3] of apples have come into production around Mattawa since 1977. In addition, construction on the dams, plutonium processing, and agriculture have employed growing numbers of people.

The town was rebuilding itself, but not actually schooling its own children in high school. To attend high school throughout the 1960s and 1970s, all local students went to the towns of Royal City or Othello—30 to 40 distant miles. Parents of middle school graduates could choose the school to which their children would be bused. Decisions were often based upon which school was closer to where they lived.

In the mid-1970s, people in Mattawa grew increasingly dissatisfied. Busing kids long distances, unpopular to begin with, was becoming somewhat contentious. A growing controversy revolved around students' participation in sports or other extracurricular activities. Kids had to wait unsupervised for buses after practices. They began to cause and get into trouble, dishonoring Mattawa's name in all three towns. Solutions brought forth to deal with the problem were of limited use. Getting students their own cars was financially prohibitive. Another solution—not participating in sports—was unthinkable.

The discipline problem of students too far from home became a major rallying point for those Mattawa residents who had begun to discuss the idea of building a local high school. Residents were also moved to call for a high school by the changes in local agricultural production. They foresaw the population increase that expanding orchard production would eventually bring. Larger populations would want a nearby high school, and a local high school would persuade people to settle in Mattawa, as opposed to Royal City or Othello. According to Lark Moore, who has lived in Mattawa since the early 1970s and serves as the school district business manager, the combination of factors, people, and personalities turned talk of a high school into a sustained effort to lobby the state school board and superintendent of public instruction (SPI).

Two names emerged from my conversations with people about the effort to establish the high school: former superintendent Shirley Bauer and farmer Jack Yorgesen. Although these two were credited with taking the most active roles, all with whom I spoke credited the community as a whole for the success of the effort.

Superintendent Bauer was described as an important figure because she responded to the community's need quickly and decisively. When the community called for a high school, she went to work to find out

how to get one. She wrote the applications to the SPI, and several community members wrote applications, letters, and strategic plans to a number of different agencies. In response, the SPI and state board of education looked at the figures on existing population, ignored the projected population estimates suggested by expanding agricultural production, and rejected the proposal for a local high school.

Jack Yorgesen is a local resident and father of six children. He and his wife had a strong interest in getting Mattawa high school students educated in Mattawa. Jack's brother has nine children. The whole family worked to convince local people and state officials that the school was not only a good idea, but absolutely necessary to the existence of Mattawa as a community. Community members argued that sports teams and high school events constituted a core in small towns and rural areas. Without that core, Mattawa was in danger of losing its very sense of self, they argued.

The majority of local people strongly supported the school. From 1978 to 1982 they met at the grocery, in homes, and in town, to plan, strategize, and prepare. Opposition reportedly came from a number of older citizens. They objected to the financial support of the school that would be acquired through bonds and levies, and in the words of a parent active at the time, "they opposed change in any form." This parent said, however, that the opponents were soon persuaded that local kids needed to be educated locally. They gave their support when they also began to realize that the school would offer services and education to everyone (as indeed it now does).

Other work to establish the high school involved persuading the state that the school was needed and securing funding to build and operate it. Yet, the funding was not entirely the responsibility of the state. When the state began to relent, indicating tentative approval of the school, officials told Mattawa leaders that the community would have to pass bonds and levies before establishment of the school could be formally approved. The first bond vote passed with 78 percent support. The first levy to fund the school failed, due largely to the opposition previously mentioned. But the second levy passed.

The crucial factor in the success, however, was not this vote, the concerted leadership of Bauer and Yorgesen, the support of older residents, or even the state's assent. Instead, I was told, a grand gesture by 30 residents actually carried the day.

In 1984, 30 Mattawa farmers piled into their own cars and drove across the state to Whitby Island, one of the San Juan Islands in the northwest corner of Washington, to attend a state school board meeting en masse. The contingent* made four points to the board:

1. Irrigation and orchards would bring new people to the area and increase the local population considerably. The new families would need to be educated, and their decision on whether to settle in Mattawa or not could depend on the educational opportunities available.
2. More agriculture and more people would mean more commuters to high school. Many towns have some students who commute, but not 100 percent of the students.
3. Local kids were getting into trouble because of the long commute.
4. Mattawa was losing its identity. When asked where they were from, students would name the town in which they attended high school, not Mattawa.

The board listened, seemingly dumbstruck by the determination of the large contingent from Mattawa. The state board listened to population projections, as well as arguments that it was no longer tenable to bus an entire town's high school students such distances. They saw farmers who had left work and traveled across the state at their own expense to attend the meetings. They understood, as they had not apparently understood before, who the people of Mattawa were and what they wanted. They agreed to permit establishment of a high school, with their agreement contingent upon the passage of the bond. Patty Yorgesen later observed,

> We were given a high school . . . on the basis of a small clause on "remote and necessary" and if we could pass a bond to build. The vote on the state board looked as if it was going to come down to a tied vote with [the state superintendent of public instruction] to cast the deciding vote, which we knew would be a "no" vote. So they called for a break and we went to work trying to convince one board member to change his mind. Instead, one agreed to abstain and not vote, so it [the plea] would move on its own merit [without the intervention of the state superintendent].

The trip became legendary in subsequent years. Current Superintendent William Miller spoke of it to me with pride and admiration. He was deeply impressed with the resolve and commitment of the farmers. And he seemed certain that without this concerted public action, the state school board and SPI would have remained unmoved by the entreaties of distant Mattawa.

In early 1985, the school was founded. In the fall of 1986, the first class of graduating middle school students entered Wahluke High School. The town had decided that students already attending Royal City or Othello High would complete high school where they were. The dedication of Wahluke High School was ceremonious and determined. The town's victory was an invitation to start working. For Wahluke High School was not to be just a local *school*; it was to be an outstanding academic and community institution.

Wahluke High School

As was projected 20 years earlier, Wahluke School District has experienced substantial growth. In 1987, the district enrolled just 374 students in all grades. In 1997 (that is, at the time of my visits) the district enrolled 1,287 students, 263 of them at the high school.[5] Today the school lives up to its promises to the community. It is regarded as a first-rate high school and many graduates go on to college. In the past 10 years, three graduates who left to attend college have returned to teach at the high school.

The superintendent is pursuing an entrepreneurial model of instruction that began with a middle school and special education recycling program, "Rerun, Recycle," which reportedly now has a budget in the tens of thousands of dollars. The middle school students started an apple gift box business, shipping local apples as corporate gifts. And the high school students operate a very successful embroidery business called Fine Thread, through which they embroider team jackets, hats, and socks. The students decide what to market and to whom. They make hats with the Royal City emblem on them to sell at Wahluke-Royal City games. They are also getting contracts from local businesses to make hats, shirts, and uniforms.

In the history class, students have learned about the community through an oral history assignment. The art students have made stained glass windows for their school and for local businesses. An audio-video

course allows students to run a community radio station and play music, as well as broadcast news about community affairs. And the community, like small rural communities almost everywhere, is proud of its sports teams.

Wahluke High School also reaches further into the community, providing instruction for local people of all ages. The district offers GED and general education classes at the high school, while Big Bend Community College, located in Moses Lake, about 65 miles to the northeast of Mattawa, offers evening courses.

The school is also involved with the community in other ways. The community theater, for instance, is housed in the school (the district business manager is one of the leading community actors). When hearings were to be held about the government's prospective return of lands along the Columbia River, the superintendent offered the use of school buildings for the hearings. Senators and state officials joined local and regional residents to discuss how much land would be returned, how much would be kept for a nature reserve, and what to do with the remaining land given back. The hearings received statewide media coverage and praise from all participants.

Wahluke High School in Mattawa is a community school which continues to serve a community that is evolving and changing. The town has faced difficulties in its drive to build on its strengths and flourish concurrently with the school. For example, one reported barrier was that Mattawa shared Othello's zip code, which hindered the town's ability to secure grants and attract business for many years. "Can't develop without a zip code," the superintendent said. After several requests, the town was assigned its own zip code. Also, the lack of a municipal sewer system limited construction of multifamily housing units. People told me that if there were housing for orchard workers, the school enrollments would double. Even without the sewers and housing, 2,000 people have moved to the town over the past 20 years. Planning for the sewer project has reportedly been completed and funding secured.

If predictions are correct, Mattawa's growth will continue and new challenges will arise. Investors are now poised to set up housing development areas. A local vineyard won an international prize for its grapes and is attracting more investment. A resort with an 18-hole golf course

and water sports is planned. While the rate of growth experienced in Mattawa hardly constitutes a boom, it surpasses modest growth common in much of rural America from 1987 to 1997.

The biggest change in Mattawa, and most of the population growth, has been derived from the labor that has developed the orchards and vineyards. In 1987 the high school was 67 percent non-Hispanic white; in 1997, it was 71 percent Hispanic, far above the statewide average of 6 percent minority populations.

How does this affect the ways the high school serves its community? The superintendent and Wahluke's principal develop and preside over an array of programs designed to involve and serve Hispanic students. As Superintendent Miller explained, until recently, Hispanic students had not been represented on any sports teams. He established a Spanish sports circle, whose soccer players were soon playing on the school teams and, in fact, taking them to league championships. Bilingual transition classes operate in all grades. Class size is smaller than in other classes and there are more aides. The majority of students who speak only Spanish, however, are in the lower grades: 80 percent of elementary school students speak only Spanish. A full-time kindergarten English program, as well as a summer program, serve elementary students. The school district has adopted an approach that uses Spanish to teach skills, while simultaneously helping native Spanish speakers to learn English.

Observing middle school audio-video, math, and art classes, I met and spoke with many Spanish-speaking students. The Hispanic influence is reflected, as well, in the school's food service operation. I lunched on taquitos at the high school's All Sports Bistro, a student-run café that offers an alternative to cafeteria meals. The café sells lunch tickets every morning, but the superintendent and I had to ask the faculty sponsor of the café to reserve two of them for us, since the tickets usually sell out by 9 a.m. Even the regular cafeteria menu offered a choice (for instance) of corn dogs or tostadas.

I observed a senior history class taught by the dynamic teacher who had completed a local oral history project with her students. I was struck, however, by the reversed proportions of Hispanic to Anglo students in this class: there were just three Hispanic students. A conver-

sation with the principal confirmed that the high school drop-out rate among Hispanic students is "very high."

The numerous challenges are familiar themes in the literature on migrant education.[6] The principal, for instance, reported attempts to persuade parents not to remove children from school to work in the orchards. Other challenges include teen pregnancy, persistent dilemmas about language, pervasive poverty, and difficult domestic situations. Many Hispanic students, of course, do graduate from the high school and find work other than farm labor. Migrant Head Start and local shops are eager to hire Spanish-speaking graduates. Many Hispanic students also pursue postsecondary options, and at least one recent Hispanic graduate is reportedly attending medical school. Despite these hopeful signs, the overall circumstances facing the school, its Hispanic students, their families, and the community as a whole constitute a daunting challenge. Educators and citizens are working hard to meet the challenge, and their expectations for social progress are evident.

One teacher, for instance, has created his own "stay-in-school" program. Art teacher John Ball invited me to arrive early on the morning of my second day in Mattawa and accompany him on a "retrieval" mission. The following paragraphs will give readers an idea of how this daily mission unfolds.

At 8:00 a.m. he is in the administration office of the high school going over the day's attendance with the secretary. Together they check whether an absent student has been excused by a parent or has informed the school that he or she would be out that day. All students whose absence is not excused are noted by Ball. He calls those who have telephones. The rest, and those whose parents are unreachable, are on his list. He checks their addresses and, together with a Spanish-speaking assistant from the middle school, heads for his car. Then he's off.

This day, first stop is the adjacent community of Beverly. There, in a wooden shack surrounded by dirt and rusted metal, we "retrieve" Ernesto. Ball knocks on the door and the boy's mother answers. The assistant speaks to her, asking why her son wasn't in school. The boy appears, putting on his shirt. With the assistant translating, the art teacher and Ernesto's mother discuss the boy's lateness and his need to

get to school. With Ernesto in tow, we get in the car and set off for the home of the next student on the list.

This time, at his knock, two students come out of a trailer home with their jackets on and books in hand. "We were just late today," they explain; no excuse, no intention of staying out of school, just late. They seem happy and comfortable to be rounded up by John Ball. These students guide us to the next home, where no one answers the door. One of the students explains that the girl we are looking for no longer lives there and points out the trailer to which her family had moved.

On the way through town, we pass a young girl walking along the road with a bag of groceries. The assistant recognizes her as a middle school student. We stop the car to ask why she is not in school. She explains in Spanish that her mother is sick and she has to take care of her and her younger brother. John sees this as an excused absence. We leave her to her work and head back to the school with a full carload of more or less eager students. Ball pursues this daily effort with sensitivity. He exerts pressure, but with compassion and evident common sense.

The school and community are building bridges as opportunities arise. They have rallied together against a recent crime wave that culminated in a shooting at a local gas station. Gang activity is not tolerated at the school or in the town, and a substantial sum of money was spent on school surveillance equipment—cameras and motion sensors—to ensure that kids' actions are always observed. The parents and administrators with whom I spoke felt the monitoring helped ensure a safe atmosphere.

The high school constitutes a strong core for Mattawa and seemingly serves to anchor people to the locale. Nonetheless, *success* in the eyes of some students is synonymous with *achievement elsewhere*. Several students with whom I spoke said they hoped to attend college and work in one of the larger cities of central or western Washington. They spoke with admiration of graduates who were now pursuing careers in Seattle, for example.

One of the Wahluke High teachers, however, who was raised in Mattawa and who went to Royal City High School and Washington State University, had himself taught in a large city. His attitude was, "I've been out there." He had had the opportunity to choose where he wanted to be, and he had definitely *chosen* Mattawa.

Accomplishments and Challenges at Wahluke High School

The current superintendent receives enthusiastic support from students and teachers for the entrepreneurial model. Two middle school students were almost breathless as I watched them receive their first order for apple gift boxes. Dr. Miller is also lauded statewide for his antigang approach. He was, for instance, invited to address state school board meetings to describe how Mattawa remained a safe community. He supports a wide range of innovative, teacher-initiated projects in both academic and vocational programs. Computer literacy is taught in the intermediate school and a major software corporation has offered to provide the district with advanced training. The high school principal also works closely with his students to integrate academic and extracurricular activities.

Still, intense poverty and language difficulties continue to divide Mattawa. The high school is a microcosm of the community, so class and ethnic distinctions apply throughout. The high school staff and administration, that is, those in positions of authority, are largely Anglo, while the subordinate majority population is Hispanic. The realm of success, that is, graduation and access to a wide employment field, is largely the domain of the more affluent Anglos, while undereducation and limited job prospects generally constitute the domain of impoverished Hispanics.

As school board member Patricia Gerdes said, the struggling Hispanic immigrants *are* nonetheless members of the community of Mattawa. She wants to overcome the division that tends "to exclude immigrants from the identity and opportunities reserved for other Mattawans." She champions the role of the school in embracing, challenging, and educating *all* students. And she is convinced that the future of Mattawa will see Hispanic landowners, teachers, and farm laborers working alongside Anglos throughout the community.[7] Her faith derives in no small part from the school's role in continually redefining itself in relationship to the changing and growing community.

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Notes

1. This case study was conducted by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory as part of the Laboratory Network Program funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement.
2. The town of Mattawa is located about 130 miles southeast of Seattle and approximately 16 miles south of the point at which I-90 crosses the Columbia River. The town sits about 3 miles due east of the river.
3. Representing a considerable capital investment, 38,000 acres is an *extensive* orchard planting.
4. Those 30 included the following: Craig and Vicki Sabin, Roxie Phillips, Dave and Sharon Yorgesen, Lark Moore, Drs. Shirley and Leroy Bauer, Jack and Patty Yorgesen, Elwin Golladay, Sharon Worgum, Elva Wilkie, Don and Geri Chumley, Charles Ragland, Virginia Yanoff, and Gordon and Suzan Lowell. Others who served on the committee were as follows: John Ball, Mary Jo Bassani, Jim Bennett, Jane Calaway, Trisha Casey, Roland Clark, Jim Curdy, Sunshine Didra, Charles Dougherty, Stephen Ellis, Patty Gerdes, Mark Hedman, Bill Hyndman, Glen Leland, Carol Maughan, Peggy Catlow, Linda Mead, Stan Nelson, Bob Parker, Christie Phelps, Wayne Sahli, Vonna Schutter, Harley Skagley, Judy Sutton, Tom Thorsen, and Steve Worgum.
5. The research team agreed that the town of Mattawa met the selection criteria. Growth had indeed come, contingent on irrigation, but the new population base was now comparatively stable. Mattawa, in particular, was by no means a boomtown: orchards, unlike rural mining or some rural manufacturing operations, are a long-term investment.
6. See A. Darder, R. Torres, and H. Gutiérrez, *Latinos and Education: A Critical Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1997); J. Flores, ed., *Children of La Frontera: Binational Efforts to Serve Mexican Migrant and Immigrant Students* (Charleston, WV: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, 1996); and J. Koss-Chioino and L. Vargas, *Working with Latino Youth: Culture, Development, Context* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999).
7. See Appendix B for an update by William Miller on recent events in Mattawa.

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